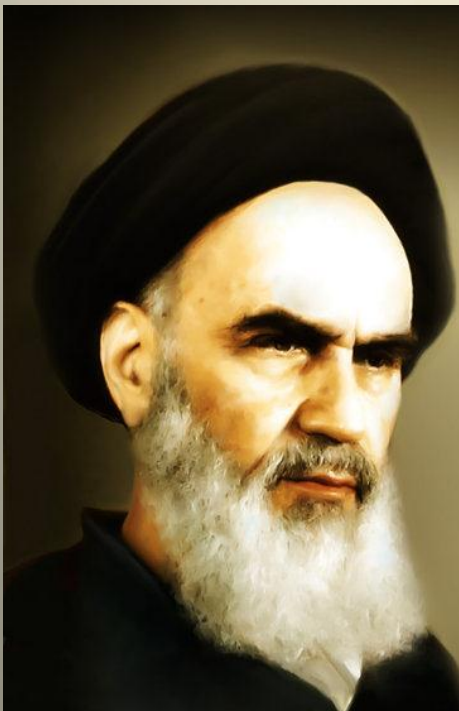


Not many people are aware that Iran used to be majority Sunni, producing scholars such as Abu Hanifa, Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, until the Safavids forcefully converted it to Twelver Shi'ism in the 1500s.

The Conversion of Iran to Twelver Shi'ism: A Preliminary Historical Overview

<http://ballandalus.wordpress.com/>



Part 1:

The Conversion of Iran to Twelver
Shi'ism: A Preliminary Historical
Overview

Part 2:

The Persian Origin of the Six Masters of
Sunni Hadith

The Conversion of Iran to Twelver Shi'ism: A Preliminary Historical Overview

[August 4, 2014](#) by [ballandalus](#)

One of the most significant transformations that occurred in Islamic history, the legacy of which is apparent even in our own day, was undoubtedly the conversion of Iran from Sunnism to Shi'ism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although there have been other instances throughout Islamic history of rulers seeking to bring about religious uniformity for political reasons—the Almohads in Iberia and North Africa being prime examples; the example of Malikism in al-Andalus is another—the case of the Safavids in Iran is perhaps the only example where such a conversion of territory was largely successful, in terms of both the scale of the project and its permanence. The end result was that an entire region of the Islamic world was placed under the exclusive dominion of a single sect, Twelver Shi'ism, at the expense of other forms of Islam (Sunnism and Zaydi Shi'ism).

A little-known fact to most laypeople is that, for much of its Islamic history, between the Arab conquest in the seventh century and the establishment of the Safavids as rulers of the country in the sixteenth, Iran was a stronghold and intellectual center of Sunni Islam. Most of the significant thinkers and figures of Sunnism, including theologians (Sharif al-Jurjani, Fazlallah b. Ruzbihan Khunji-Isfahani), mystics (Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Abd al-Qadir al-Gilani), founders of schools of law (Abu Hanifa, Dawud al-Zahiri), historians (Tabari, Bayhaqi), political theorists (Nizam al-Mulk, Jalal al-Din Davvani), poets (Abd al-Rahman Jami, Farid ud-Din Attar), and hadith collectors (all the Sunni authors of the *Sihah al-Sitta*) were Iranian. To be sure, there were significant Shi'i communities in Iran as well, concentrated mainly in Kashan, Qom, and Gilan but these included Isma'ili and Zaydi groupings as well as Twelvers. The Isma'ilis were largely destroyed and the Twelvers would only experience ascendancy on the Iranian plateau following the Mongol invasions and the

establishment of the Il-Khanate (1256–1335) and the Qaraqoyunlu dynasty (1375–1468). However, these latter two dynasties were characterized by their toleration of Shi‘ism rather than any large-scale attempt to impose the faith on their populations, as the Safavids would do. In this piece, I want to shed some light on the process of the Safavid conversion of Iran to Twelver Shi‘ism in order to encourage further inquiry into the topic.

As a scholar of medieval and early modern Iberia—and especially as one interested in the large-scale conversions of 1391 and 1501 in Spain—I find this particular topic to be one of utmost importance. The destruction of the Sunni community of Iran bears strong resemblances to the process of the Christianization of conquered regions of al-Andalus. It is also quite an interesting fact in itself that the conversion of the Muslims of Spain and the conversion of Iranian Sunnis were both enacted in the year 1501. Both processes were also extremely politically motivated and had far more to do with the process of state-building, the relationship between clergy and state power, and the homogenization of the polity in the early modern world than any inherent propensity of either Catholicism or Twelver Shi‘ism for violence. There was also an important messianic component in both cases, which should certainly not be ignored. As the 500th anniversary of the important battle of Chaldiran (1514) approaches, it is now more important than ever to consider the significance of the Safavid conversion of Iran, a historical event which has evaded the historical consciousness of the vast majority of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The conversion of Iran was a critical component (some may even argue a catalyst) in the confessionalization of the Near East that took place in the early modern period. By “confessionalization,” I mean the increased association between religious identity, sectarianism and the polity. While for much of Islamic history, various sects had coexisted (however uneasily) throughout the Islamic lands, often residing in close proximity to one another, the process of confessionalization involved the exclusive identification of a political entity (and thus, a geographic region) with a particular sect (or confession/creed). This meant that the populations which resided in each entity acquired a stronger sectarian identity and, thus, the lines between sects (often blurred in the medieval period) became increasingly defined. State power began to play a more direct role in determining the lines between “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy,” enacting harsh sanctions against those deemed to belong to the latter category. “Confessionalization” also implies that a polity’s domestic and foreign policy also became increasingly tied to its own sectarian affiliation. By the mid-sixteenth

century three major political formations had emerged: A staunchly Shi'i Safavid Iran, an increasingly Sunni Central Asia (under the Uzbeks), and a staunchly Sunni Ottoman Empire. Sunnism was harshly repressed in Safavid domains, just as Shi'ism was severely persecuted in Central Asia and the Ottoman lands. It was this confessionalization of the Middle East that played a central role in weakening whatever cultural or religious unity remained in the central Islamic lands. To some degree, this association between sect and state still has profound consequences in the modern-day Middle East.



The Rise of the Safavids (1501–1514)

In the early sixteenth century, the establishment of the Safavid polity had a major effect upon the political fortunes of Twelver Shi'ism, previously existing as a tolerated but oppressed religious community, and greatly transformed the relationship between Sunnis and Shi'is in the Islamic world. It was essentially the militant espousal of Twelver Shi'ism by the Safavids and the sporadic, yet devastating, wars with the Ottoman Empire which played a key role in the confessionalization of the Near East into two distinctive sectarian camps. It was during the reign of Shāh Ismā'īl (r. 1501–1524) that Iran was conquered by the Safavids, Shi'ism established as the official religion, and the ritual cursing of sacred Sunni personages, namely the Companions of the Prophet, institutionalized. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the most confrontational attitudes within the Sunni and Shi'i traditions—exemplified by *takfīr* (anathematization) and *sabb* (ritual cursing)—were appropriated, developed and deployed by

the Ottomans and Safavids respectively. The practice of *sabb*, in particular, played a central role in the development of early modern Iranian Shi'i religious identity and greatly informed the attitude of the Ottomans towards the Safavid state. In order to better grasp the process and implications of this transformation, it is important to revisit the circumstances surrounding the rise and establishment of the Safavids in Iran.



Since at least the mid-fifteenth century, the Safavid order, which was established by Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn of Ardabil (d. 1334) as an ostensibly Sunni *ṭarīqah* (Sufi order), had become increasingly important as a political force in the territories of the Aqquyūnlū in Iraq, Anatolia, and Azerbaijan.^[1] It was during the period when Shaykh Junayd ibn Ibrāhīm (d. 1460) assumed leadership of the Safavid order that it became explicitly Shi'i and closely

affiliated with the more *ghulātī* (extremist/heterodox) strands of Shi‘ism.^[ii] It was also during this period when the Safavids were fully transformed from a mystical order into a militant organization which actively engaged in politics and conquest, but whose leaders nevertheless maintained their spiritual importance and sacral authority as leaders of the *ṭarīqah*.^[iii] Junayd, who now claimed the title “sultan” as well as “shaykh”^[iv], thereby underscoring this major transformation of the order, acquired a strong following among the pastoral tribes of eastern Anatolia, Syria and Iraq and entered into an alliance with Uzūn Ḥasan (d. 1478), the ruler of the Aqquyūnlū confederation.^[v] The militarization and politicization of the Safavid order continued under the leadership of Junayd’s son, Ḥaydar (d. 1488), who eventually established his base at Ardabil in Azerbaijan with the assistance of Uzūn Ḥasan, and continued to attract followers to his cause.^[vi]

During Ḥaydar’s leadership of the Safavid order, the Turcoman tribes adopted the distinctive twelve-pointed red head-gear (known as the *tāj-i ḥaydarī*), signifying allegiance to the Twelve Shi‘i Imāms, for which they became known in Turkish as the Kizilbash (“red-heads”).^[vii] It is important to note that the Shi‘ism promoted by Junayd and Ḥaydar did not resemble the more “orthodox” Twelver Shi‘ism of urban centers such as Qom, Ḥilla or Jabal ‘Āmil, but was rather an eclectic mix of various doctrines which were subsumed under the general framework of Shi‘i devotion to the Twelve Imāms.^[viii] In fact, *sabb/shatm* is a practice which was, historically, associated quite closely with the *ghulāt*, which is why it is important to underscore this aspect of the early Safavid movement in order to understand the developments which occurred following the movement’s conquest of Iran in 1501. It appears that many of Ḥaydar’s followers adopted extremist Shi‘i beliefs and deified their leader, believing him to be a manifestation of God. According to Fazlallāh ibn Rūzbihān Khunjī (d. 1517), “it [was] reported that [the Kizilbash] considered [Ḥaydar] as their god and, neglecting the duties of *namāz* and public prayers, looked upon the Shaykh as their *qibla* and the being to whom prostration was due.”^[ix] During Ḥaydar’s reign as head of the Safavid order in the late fifteenth century, it was transformed into a fully independent political and military force, a fact which generated much anxiety among Uzūn Ḥasan’s son, Sultan Ya‘qūb who sought to curb the power of Ḥaydar and his followers.^[x] Before long, the Kizilbash, whose numbers were significantly augmented by even more Turcoman tribesmen from Iraq and Anatolia, were in open conflict with both the Shirvanids and the Aqquyunlu, and Ḥaydar himself was killed fighting against their combined forces in 1488.^[xi] Although this defeat temporarily

halted the rise of Kizilbash, it did not permanently end the threat emanating from the Turcoman tribes and the Safavid order.



Between 1501 and 1510, Ḥaydar's son, Ismā'īl utilized this spiritual authority to mobilize his Kizilbash followers to conquer all the regions between eastern Anatolia and Khurasān. He successfully overthrew the remnants of the Aqquyūnlū dynasty and set out to conquer a large swathe of territory, seizing the Shirvanid capital of Baku (1500), Tabriz (1501), Isfahan (1503), as well as the old 'Abbāsīd capital of Baghdad (1508), and established his sovereignty over Persia, Azerbaijan, Eastern Anatolia, and Iraq, effectively unifying the old territories of Iran for the first time in centuries.[\[xii\]](#) In 1510, he defeated and killed the Uzbek ruler Shaybānī Khān (d. 1510) and extended his rule into Khurāsān and brought both Mashhad and Herat under his control.[\[xiii\]](#) Following his conquests, he established Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion throughout his domains, and violently imposed this creed upon his (largely Sunni) subjects in Iran, Iraq, and Azerbaijan by introducing the Shi'i call to prayer and instituting the practice of *sabb* whereby the first three Caliphs, the Prophet's wife 'Ā'isha, and a number of the Prophet's Companions were ritually cursed and vilified.[\[xiv\]](#) This practice was particularly emphasized in regions where the majority of the population was Sunni, and most of the population was forced to engage in it or face persecution. There are examples of several prominent clerics being executed for their refusal to publicly participate in this practice. Sufis, in particular, were the target of violence as a later Safavid Shi'i source indicates: "Isma'īl crushed all the *silsilahs* (Sufi orders); the graves of their

ancestors were destroyed, not to mention what befell their successors...he eradicated most of the *silsilahs* of sayyids and shaykhs.”[\[xv\]](#) Moreover, Ismā‘īl’s conquests were accompanied by mass violence against Sunni communities, the devastation of their property, and the destruction of shrines, including those of the important figures of Abu Ḥanīfa (d. 767) and ‘Abd al-Qādir Gīlānī (d. 1166) in Baghdad.[\[xvi\]](#)

Various massacres also took place: 10,000 were executed near Hamadan in 1503; 4000 members of the Kaziruni Sufi order were murdered in Fars, while all the tombs of rival Sufi orders were desecrated; ten thousand refugees and dissenters who took up refuge in Asta were put to the sword; the entire cities of Yazd, Tabas and Abarquh was slaughtered, tens of thousands of people in these three cities alone according to Safavid chronicles; in Khurasan, the tomb of Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492) was destroyed and the entire population of Qarshi—about 15,000 people—massacred.[\[xvii\]](#) The violent institutionalization of Shi‘ism and the brutal eradication of Sunni Islam in the lands under Safavid rule was meant to announce the arrival of a new dispensation, one which was predicated on the defeat of *bāṭil* (“falsehood”; identified with Sunni Islam) and the elevation of *ḥaqq* (“truth”, which could only be Shi‘ism). The Sunni community of Iran, which had existed for centuries in the country, was permanently destroyed between the early sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries through a sustained process of mass violence, forced conversion, exile, the destruction of religious institutions (Sufi orders, mosques, and networks of scholars), and a concentrated program of religious propaganda aimed at transforming the country into a bastion of Twelver Shi‘ism. By the late seventeenth century, the only Sunni communities that remained were those residing along Iran’s frontiers and they were treated with varying degrees of toleration.



Confrontation with the Ottomans

While Ismā‘īl, now king of Iran, was expanding his empire eastwards, his deputies (known as *khulafā’*) sought to agitate the Turcoman tribes of central and western Anatolia into rebellion against the Ottomans in order to expand Safavid domains westward. Rather than actively confront the Kizilbash militarily, Bayezid II took a more diplomatic approach and wrote Ismā‘īl a letter in which he scolded the latter for the excesses of his followers, his betrayal of the Sufi path by seeking worldly power, and for his role in dividing the Muslim community.^[xviii] Perhaps encouraged by the relative inaction of the Ottomans, a massive Kizilbash uprising, under the direction of Shāh-kulu (“slave of the Shāh [Ismā‘īl]”), erupted across western and central Anatolia in 1511.^[xix] Largely as a result of Bayezid’s perceived inability to suppress the Kizilbash uprisings, Selīm I acceded to the Ottoman throne in 1512 and proceeded to crush the revolt, massacring nearly 40,000 Shi‘is accused of being Kizilbash or Safavid agents, and imprisoning or deporting thousands of others.^[xx]

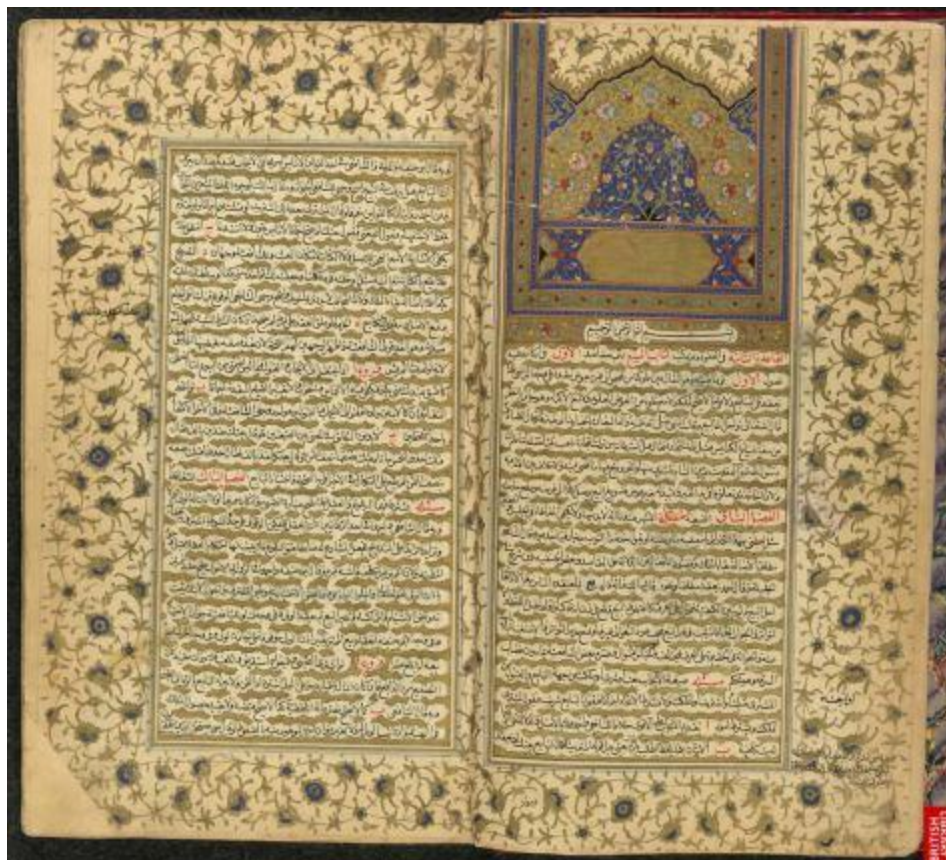
This massive repression of the Kizilbash in Anatolia was a serious blow to the prestige of the Safavids and prompted Shāh Ismā‘īl to launch an invasion of eastern Anatolia in 1514.^[xxi] As a result, Selīm I marched eastwards to confront Ismā‘īl and engaged the Safavids in August 1514 at the Battle of Chaldiran, which ended in a decisive victory for the Ottomans, who then proceeded to establish their authority over eastern Anatolia and to occupy the Safavid capital at Tabriz, which was abandoned shortly thereafter.^[xxii] Shāh Ismā‘īl’s defeat at Chaldiran necessitated a retreat from the more extravagant claims which were previously espoused—including pretensions to divinity—and an emphasis upon more normative modes of legitimacy. It was in this context that the Twelver Shi’i *mujtahids*, among whom ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Karakī (d. 1534) was considered the most prominent, began to play an increasingly important role in defining the legitimacy of the state and disseminating a correct understanding of orthodox Shi’ism among the populace.^[xxiii] Al-Karakī, who had joined the court of Shāh Ismā‘īl around 1508, was present at the Safavid capture of Herat in 1511.^[xxiv]



The Institutionalization of *Sabb*

It would be oversimplistic to characterize the institutionalization of ritual cursing in Safavid Iran merely as an outgrowth of the messianic and heterodox tendencies of the Kizilbash, although this was certainly a factor in its institutionalization. The ritual cursing of the first two caliphs, viewed as usurpers and oppressors by Twelver Shi’is, has an important history which long precedes the Safavids. However, due to the relative paucity of sources, it is

unclear whether the implementation of this practice—at Tabriz in 1501, and then across Iran—was a product of this ancient tradition or merely a political tool which was utilized in order to undermine the established Sunnism of the Iranian populace and facilitate the adoption of Twelver Shi‘ism as the state religion.^[xxv] In any case, the institutionalization of *sabb* was an unprecedented development in Shi‘i history and was a major violation of the normative practice of *taqīyya*. Neither the Fatimids nor the Buyids, both Shi‘i states in the Middle Ages, had ever instituted such a practice.



In several ways, the early Safavid period represents a major break with classical Shi‘ism with regard to the issue of *tabarru’*. Based upon my reading of the literature and the primary sources consulted, the institutionalization of the practice of public vilification of the Companions of the Prophet—who were considered to be sacred personages by the Sunnis—was a bold move and a clear abandonment of *taqīyya* or precautionary dissimulation. Although the traditional view among Shi‘is was that it was wisest to await the arrival of the Mahdī or Qā‘im, who would exact retribution upon the enemies of the faith and reveal the truth of all things to them, the establishment of the Safavids in Iran was a major development which prompted an increasingly activist approach, especially among figures such as al-Karakī

who viewed the Safavids as the means by which the faithful would be empowered and enabled to manifest their faith openly. Following al-Karakī's lead, many prominent Shi'i scholars during the Safavid period—including Nūr Allāh al-Shushtarī (d. 1610) and Muḥammad Baqir al-Majlisī (d. 1699)—would compose major works demonstrating the invalidity of Sunnism, the merits of cursing the Companions of the Prophet, and the necessity of openly confronting the vast majority of "misguided Muslims" about these facts.[\[xlviii\]](#) Indeed, al-Shushtarī is a particularly interesting case since he was active in an explicitly non-Shi'i state—Mughal India—but nonetheless proclaimed that he "threw away the scarf of *taqīyya* and, taking with me an army of arguments, I plunged myself into *jihād* against the 'ulamā' of this country."[\[xlix\]](#) Shushtarī's statement about casting aside *taqīyya* was a direct reference for his insistence upon the public cursing of the Prophet's Companions and the exposure of their historical injustices against the Family of the Prophet. The career of Shushtarī, like that of al-Karakī, reinforced the association between public anti-Sunni activities and the abandonment of *taqīyya*. Both were conscious actions and militated against the prevailing wisdom which had hitherto dominated medieval Shi'ism.

Needless to say, the forced conversion of Iran to Shi'ism and the institutionalization of ritual cursing was not received well by the Sunni world. The existence of this practice became the explicit *casus belli* of the Safavid-Ottoman wars throughout much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Various fatwas were issued by the Ottoman religious establishment emphasizing the complete infidelity of Safavid Iran and the necessity of all faithful Muslims to wage war against it in order to defend the honor of the first three caliphs and the Companions of the Prophet.[\[1\]](#) The Sunni juristical discourse of *takfīr* was placed in the service of the Ottoman state, which deployed it against the Safavids (and other Shi'ite groups) as it deemed fit. This gave the wars between the Ottomans and Safavids a strongly religious and sectarian character and was instrumental in the confessionalization of the Near East during the early modern period.



Further reading

Primary Sources

Ebü's-su'üd Efendi, Mehmed. "Fatwa against the Kizilbash (1548)." Translated into Arabic and edited by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Razzāq al-'Awfī. In Muḥammad 'Abd al-Razzāq al-'Awfī, *Al-Şirā' al-Şafawī al-'Uthmānī wa ta'thīrātuhu 'ala al-Mashriq al-'Arabī* (Tripoli, Libya: Akādīmīyat al-Fikr al-Jamāhīrī, 2008), pp. 260–26

_____. *Şeyhülislam Ebussuud Efendi Fetvaları*. Edited by Mehmet Ertuğrul Düzdağ. Istanbul: Enderun Kitabevi, 1972

Ibn 'Arab Qāḍī, Muṭahhar ibn Abd al-Raḥmān. "Fatwa Concerning the Disbelief of the Sect of the Kizilbash (1581)." In Elke Eberhard, *Osmanische Polemik gegen die Safawiden im 16. Jahrhundert nach arabischen Handschriften* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1970), pp. 220–229

Ibn Ḥajar al-Ḥaythamī, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad. *Al-Şawā'iq al-Muḥriqah 'ala ahl al-rafd wa al-ḍalāl wa al-zandaqah*. Ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Turkī. Beirut: Mu'asasat al-Risālah, 1997

al-Karakī, ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn. *Nafahāt al-Lāhūt fī La‘n al-Jibt wa al-Ṭāghūt*. Edited by Shaykh Muhammad Hassoun. Qom: Manshūrāt al-Iḥtijāj, 2002

_____. *Rasā’il al-Muḥaqqiq al-Karakī*. Edited by Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ḥassūn. Qom: Maktabat Ayatallāh al-‘Uẓma al-Mar‘ashī al-Najafī, 1988

Kemalpaşazade (Aḥmad ibn Suleimān ibn Kamāl). “Fatwa/Epistle Concerning the Qizilbash (1513/1514).” In Adel Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Şafavid Conflict* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1983), pp. 170–173

Khunjī, Faḍlullāh ibn Rūzbihān. *Persia in A.D. 1478–1490: An Abridged Translation of Faḍlullāh ibn Rūzbihān Khunjī’s “Tārīkh-i ‘Ālam-ārā-yi Amīnī.”* Edited and translated by Vladimir Minorsky. London: The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1957

al-Majlisī, Muḥammad Bāqir. *Biḥār al-Anwār al-Jāmi‘a li-Durrar Akhbār al-A’imma al-Aṭhār*. Edited by Shaykh Mahmud Doryab. Beirut: Dār al-Ta‘āruf li-l-Maṭbū‘āt, 2001

al-Maqdisī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wāḥid. *Al-Nahī ‘an Sabb al-Aṣḥāb wa ma fīhi min al-Iḥm wa al-‘Iqāb*. Edited by Abd al-Rahman Abd Allah Turki. Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1994

al-Qarī, ‘Alī ibn Sulṭān. *Sharḥ Kitāb al-Fiqh al-Akbar*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyya, 1995

al-Qummī, ‘Alī ibn Ibrahīm. *Tafsīr al-Qummī*. Edited by Sayyid Tayyib al-Musawi al-Jaza’iri. Najaf: Maktabat al-Huda, 1967

Selīm I. “Letters to Shāh Ismā‘īl.” Translated into Arabic and edited by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-‘Awfī. In Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-‘Awfī, *Al-Şirā‘ al-Şafawī al-‘Uthmānī wa ta’tḥirātuḥu ‘ala al-Mashriq al-‘Arabī* (Tripoli, Libya: Akādīmīyat al-Fikr al-Jamāhīrī, 2008), pp. 263–265

Shāh Ismā‘īl I. “The Poetry of Shāh Ismā‘īl I.” Edited and translated by Vladimir Minorsky. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 (1942): 1006a–1053a

al-Shushtarī, Nūr Allāh. *Al-Şawārim al-Murhaqa fī Naqḍ al-Şawā‘iq al-Muḥriqa*. Edited by Jalal al-Din al-Husaynī. Tehran: Chāpkhānah-i Nahẓat, 1948

_____. *Maṣāʾib al-Nawāṣib*. Edited by Qays al-Attar. Qom: Dalile-Ma, 2005

Secondary Literature

Abisaab, Rula Jurdi. *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004

Afsaruddin, Asma. *Excellence and Precedence: Medieval Islamic Discourse on Legitimate Leadership*. Leiden: Brill, 2002

Allouche, Adel. *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Şafavid Conflict (906–962/1500–1555)*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1983

Arjomand, Said Amir. *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shiʿite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984

Babayan, Kathryn. “The Safavid Synthesis: From Qizilbash Islam to Imamite Shiʿism.” *Iranian Studies* 27 (1994): 135–161

Calmard, Jean. “Les Rituels Shiites et le Pouvoir. L’Imposition du Shiism Safavide, Eulogies et Malédiction Canoniques.” In *Etudes Safavides*, edited by Jean Calmard, pp. 109–150. Paris: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1993

_____. “Shiʿi Rituals and Power II: The Consolidation of Safavid Shiʿism, Folklore and Popular Religion.” In *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, edited by Charles Melville, pp. 139–190. London: I.B. Tauris, 1996

_____. “Tabarru’.” *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; Clifford E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill: Brill Online, 2013

Dakake, Maria Massi. *The Charismatic Community: Shiʿite Identity in Early Islam*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007

Dale, Stephen F. *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010

Dressler, Markus. "Inventing Orthodoxy: Competing Claims for Authority and Legitimacy in the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict." In *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power*, eds. Hakan T. Karateke and Maurus Reinkowski, pp.152–173. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

Eberhard, Elke. *Osmanische Polemik gegen die Safawiden im 16. Jahrhundert nach arabischen Handschriften*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz, 1970

Fragner, Bert. "The Safavid Empire and the Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Political and Strategic Balance of Power within the World System." In *Iran and the World in the Safavid Age*, edited by Willem Floor and Edmund Herzig, pp. 17–30. London: I.B. Tauris, 2012

Gleave, Robert. "The Legal Efficacy of *Taqiyya* Acts in Imami Jurisprudence: 'Alī al-Karakī's *al-Risāla fī l-taqīyya*." *Al-Qantara* 34 (2013): 415–438

Hermann, Denis and Yunersy Legorburo Ibarra. "La instauración del shiismo como religión de Estado en Irán bajo los safávidas: del shiismo qizilbāsh al shiismo imamita." *Estudios de Asia y Africa* 41 (2006): 439–472

Hodgson, Marshall G.S. Hodgson, Marshall G.S. "How did the Early Shi'a become Sectarian?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75 (1955): 1–13

Inalcik, Halil. "Selīm I." *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; Clifford E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill: Brill Online, 2012

Kohlberg, Etan. "*Barā'a* in Shī'ī Doctrine." *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1996): 139–175

_____. "Some Imāmī Shī'ī Views on the Ṣaḥāba." *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 5 (1984): 143–175

Naff and Roger Owen, pp. 108–129. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977

Litvak, Meir. "Encounters between Sunni and Shi'i 'Ulema' in Ottoman Iraq." In *The Sunna and Shi'a in History: Division and Ecumenism in the Muslim Middle East*, edited by Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak, pp. 69–86. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

Lucas, Scott C. *Constructive Critics, Ḥadīth Literature, and the Articulation of Sunnī Islam: The Legacy of the Generation of Ibn Sa'd, Ibn Ma'in, and Ibn Ḥanbal*. Leiden: Brill, 2004

Madelung, Wilferd. "Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Karakī." *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; Clifford E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill: Brill Online, 2013

Mazzaoui, Michel. *Shiism and the Rise of the Safavids*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966

Minorsky, Vladimir. "Shaykh Bālī-efendi on the Safavids." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 20 (1957): 437–450

Mitchell, Colin P. *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009

Momen, Moojan. *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985

Newman, Andrew J. "The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran: Arab Shiite Opposition to 'Alī al-Karakī and Safawid Shiism." *Die Welt des Islams* 33 (1993): 66–112

Savory, Roger. *Iran under the Safavids*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980

Scherberger, Max. "The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi'i Empires: Ottoman-Safavid Relations between the Fourteenth and the Seventeenth Century." In *The Sunna and Shi'a in History: Division and Ecumenism in the Muslim Middle East*, edited by Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak, pp. 51–68. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

Stanfield-Johnson, Rosemary. "Sunni Survival in Safavid Iran: Anti-Sunni Activities during the Reign of Tahmasp I." *Iranian Studies* 27 (1994): 123–133

_____. "The Tabarra'iyān and the Early Safavids." *Iranian Studies* 37 (2004): 47–71

al-Tikriti, Nabil. "Kalam in the Service of the State: Apostasy and the Defining of Ottoman Islamic Identity." In *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power*, edited by Hakan T. Karateke and Maurus Reinkowski, pp. 131–149. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

Wiederhold, Lutz. "Blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad and His Companions (*sabb al-rasūl*, *sabb al-ṣaḥābah*): The Introduction of the Topic into Shāfi'ī Legal Literature and its Relevance for Legal Practice under Mamluk Rule." *Journal of Semitic Studies* 42 (1997): 39–70

_____. "Shatm." *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; Clifford E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill: Brill Online, 2013

Winter, Stefan. *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule, 1516–1788*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

[i] Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'ī Islam*, p. 101; Denis Hermann and Yunersy Legorburo Ibarra, "La instauración del shiismo como religión de Estado en Irán bajo los safávidas: del shiismo qizilbāsh al shiismo imamita" *Estudios de Asia y Africa* 41 (2006), p. 439; Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, p. 77. Even during the height of the Safavid-Ottoman conflict in the mid-16th century, Shaykh Safī al-Dīn continued to be regarded with reverence as *morshed-e kāmēl* (the Perfect Guide) by the Ottomans (Vladimir Minorsky, "Shaykh Balī-efendi on the Safavids," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 20 [1957], p. 444). For the early history of the Safavid order, see Adel Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1983), pp. 32–38 and Michel Mazzaoui, *Shi'ism and the Rise of the Safavids* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 107–132

[ii] Kathryn Babayan, "The Safavid Synthesis: From Qizilbash Islam to Imamite Shi'ism," *Iranian Studies* 27 (1994), p. 138; Max Scherberger, "The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi'ī Empires: Ottoman Safavid Relations between the Fourteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" in *The Sunna and Shia in History: Division and Ecumenism in the Muslim Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), eds. Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak, p. 52; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'ī Islam*, p. 101; Hermann and Ibarra, "La instauración del

shiismo como religión de Estado en Irán,” p. 440; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, p. 44

[iii] Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” pp. 51–52; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, pp. 41–47; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 101; Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, p. 77; Hermann and Ibarra, “La instauración del shiismo como religión de Estado en Irán,” p. 441; Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, p. 79; Mazzaoui, *Shi’ism and the Rise of the Safavids*, pp. 158–159

[iv] The adoption of the title of “sultan” suggests worldly pretensions and a claim to political authority.

[v] Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, p. 47; Colin P. Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion, and Rhetoric* (London, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2009), p. 20

[vi] Khunji, *Persia in A.D. 1478–1490*, p. 67; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 101; Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, p. 77; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, pp. 48–49

[vii] Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, p. 79; Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” p. 52; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 101; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, p. 51

[viii] Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 101

[ix] Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, p. 51

[x] Khunji, *Persia in A.D. 1478–1490*, p. 61; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, pp. 53–54

[xi] Khunji, *Persia in A.D. 1478–1490*, pp. 71–81; Stephen Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 67; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, pp. 53–54

[xii] Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” p. 52; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, pp. 105–106; Hermann and Ibarra, “La instauración del shiismo como religión de Estado en Irán,” p. 442; Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*, p. 86; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, pp. 61–63; Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran*, pp. 23–26

[xiii] Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 3: 23; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 106; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, p. 92; Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran*, pp. 26–27

[xiv] Jean Calmard, “Tabarru’.” *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., Brill: Brill Online, 2013; Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, p. 109; Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” p. 52; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 105; Hermann and Ibarra, “La instauración del shiismo como religión de Estado en Irán,” pp. 442, 446–447; Stanfield-Johnson, Rosemary, “The Tabarra’iyan and the Early Safavids.” *Iranian Studies* 37 (2004), p. 47; Andrew Newman, “The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran: Arab Shiite Opposition to Ali al-Karaki and Safawid Shiism,” *Die Welts des Islams* 33 (1993), pp. 74–75; Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3: 23

[xv] Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran*, p. 25

[xvi] Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” p. 54; Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, p. 78; Hermann and Ibarra, “La instauración del shiismo como religión de Estado en Irán,” p. 447; Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3: 23; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 109. Abū Ḥanifa (d. 767) was particularly singled out by the Safavids for vilification because he was the founder of the school of Islamic law followed by the Ottomans. His tomb in Baghdad was desecrated in destroyed first in 1508 by Shāh Ismā‘īl and again in 1623 by Shāh ‘Abbās I (Jean Calmard, “Tabarru’,” *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*).

[xvii] Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran*, pp. 24–67

[xviii] Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” p. 53; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, p. 86

[xix] Markus Dressler, “Inventing Orthodoxy: Competing Claims for Authority and Legitimacy in the Ottoman-Safavid-Conflict,” in *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), eds. Hakan T. Karateke and Maurus Reinkowski, p. 152; Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” p. 54; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 106; Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*, p. 86; Finkel, *Osman’s Dream*, pp. 98–101; Minorsky, “Shaykh Balī-efendi on the Safavids,” p. 441; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, p. 95

[xx] Halil Inalcik, “Selīm I,” *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman et al. (Brill: Brill Online, 2012); Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” p. 54; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 106; Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*, p. 87; Minorsky, “Shaykh Balī-efendi on the Safavids,” p. 441; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, p. 89

[xxi] Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p. 106

[xxii] Inalcik, “Selīm I,” *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*; Scherberger, “The Confrontation between Sunni and Shi’i Empires,” p. 56; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, pp. 106–107; Hermann and Ibarra, “La instauración del shiismo como religión de Estado en Irán,” p. 442; Minorsky, “Shaykh Balī-efendi on the Safavids,” p. 441; Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict*, pp. 119–121

[xxiii] Andrew Newman, “The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran,” pp. 78–80

[xxiv] Andrew Newman, “The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran,” p. 79

[xxv] Previous Shi’ite states, including the Buyids and the Isma‘ili Fatimids, had not institutionalized ritual cursing in the lands they ruled and even harshly punished perpetrators of the practice, which was viewed as a disruption of public order.

[xxvi] ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt fī La‘n al-Jibt wa al-Ṭāghūt*. Edited by Shaykh Muhammad Hassoun. Qom: Manshūrāt al-Iḥtijāj, 2002

[xxvii] This was the period immediately following the consolidation of Safavid control over most of Iran and the defeat of the Uzbeks in Khurasan. As such, this period—immediately before Chaldiran—reflected the peak of Safavid power and messianic fervor.

[xxviii] Andrew Newman, “The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran,” p. 80

[xxix] Andrew Newman, “The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran,” p. 80

[xxx] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 13

[xxxi] This is a reference to the Safavid’s claim of descent from the seventh Imam, Mūsa al-Kādhim

[xxxii] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 14

[xxxiii] ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Karakī, “Risāla fī al-Taḳīyya” in *Rasā’il al-Muḥaqqiq al-Karakī* (Qom: Maktabat Ayatallāh al-‘Uẓma al-Mar’ashī al-Najafī, 1988), edited by Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ḥassūn, 2: 51–54. For an important study of this epistle, see Robert Gleave, “The Legal Efficacy of Taḳīyya Acts in Imami Jurisprudence: ‘Alī al-Karakī’s *al-Risāla fī l-taḳīyya*,” *al-Qantara* (2013), pp. 415–438.

[xxxiv] Calmard, “Tabarru’,” *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*; Andrew Newman, “The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran,” p. 82.

[xxxv] Newman, “The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran,” p. 68

[xxxvi] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, pp. 15–16

[xxxvii] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 17

[xxxviii] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, pp. 17–18

[xxxix] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 18

[xl] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 18

[xli] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 22

[xlii] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 26

[xliii] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 26

[xliv] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 27

[xlv] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 27

[xlvi] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, pp. 28–45

[xlvii] al-Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, p. 18

[xlviii] For a particularly interesting discussion of the importance of cursing which closely mirrors that laid out by al-Karakī in *Nafaḥāt al-Lāhūt*, see Nūr Allāh al-Shushtarī, *Maṣāʾib al-Nawāṣib* (Qom: Dalile-Ma, 2005), ed. Qays al-Attar, 1: 193–210

[xlix] Ali Nadeem Rezavi, “The Shia Muslims,” in *Religious Movements and Institutions in Medieval India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ed. J.S. Grewal, p. 289. For more on the career of Qāzī Nūrullāh Shūstārī, revered as *Shahīd-i Thālith* (“The Third Martyr”) by Shīʿī communities in South Asia, see Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isnā ʿAsharī Shīʿīs in India* (Canberra: Maʾrifat Publishing House, 1986), 1: 342–387

[l] Mehmed Ebu’s-su’d Efendi, “Fatwa against the Kizilbash (1548).” Translated into Arabic and edited by Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-ʿAwfī. In Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-ʿAwfī, *Al-Ṣirāʿ al-Ṣafawī al-ʿUthmānī wa taʾthīrātuhu ʿala al-Mashriq al-ʿArabī* (Tripoli, Libya: Akādīmīyat al-Fikr al-Jamāhīrī, 2008), pp. 260–262; Muṭahhar ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿArab Qādī, “Fatwa Concerning the Disbelief of the Sect of the Kizilbash (1581).” In Elke Eberhard, *Osmanische Polemik gegen die Safawiden im 16. Jahrhundert nach arabischen Handschriften* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1970), pp. 220–229; Kemalpashazade, “Fatwa/Epistle Concerning the Qizilbash (1513/1514).” In Adel Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Ṣafavid Conflict* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1983), pp. 170–173. See also Nabil al-Tikriti, “Kalam in the Service of the State: Apostasy and the Defining of Ottoman Islamic Identity,” in *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 131–149; Stefan Winter, *The*

Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule, 1516–1788 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 12–26.



The Persian Origin of the Six Masters of Sunni Hadith

June 5, 2013 by [ballandalus](#)

“If knowledge were located in the Pleiades (a constellation of stars), the Persians would surely attain it”—Prophet Muhammad

It is a little known fact that all six of the authors/compilers of the major books of Sunni ḥadīth—works that are together known as the *Ṣiḥāḥ al-Sitta*—were of Persian/Iranian origin. Interestingly, these eminent figures are only six of hundreds of other Iranian scholars who were central to the shaping of the Sunni religious and intellectual tradition. In a scheme of Islamic history which is dominated by Arabo-centrism and in a contemporary world in which the association between Iran and Shi'ism is so central that one cannot think of one without the other, this fact of the Persian origin of some of the most important figures of authority in Sunni Islam becomes increasingly relevant in challenging the dominant narratives and assumptions which continue to pervade the historical understanding (and contemporary vision) of Islam and Iran.



1) Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mughīrah ibn Bardizbah al-Ju‘fī al-Bukhārī (810–870), originally from Bukhara (located in modern-day Uzbekistan)

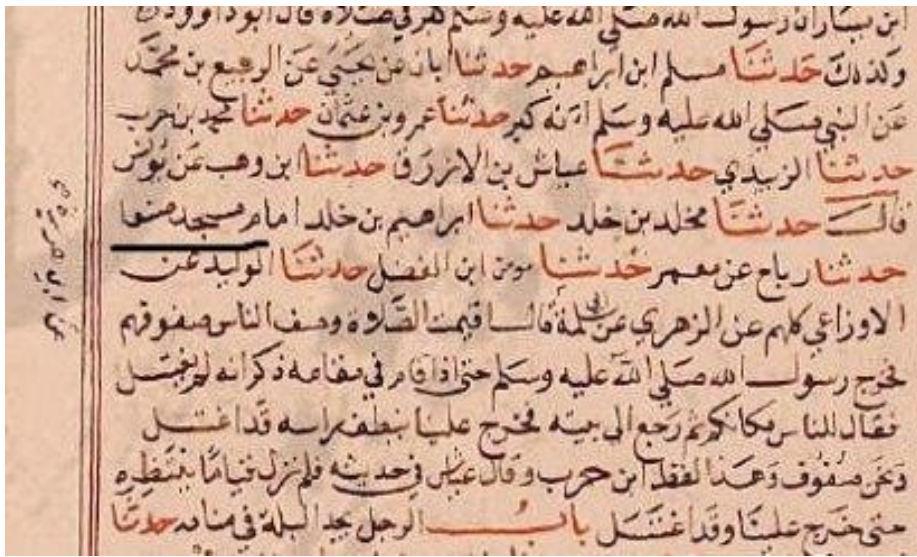




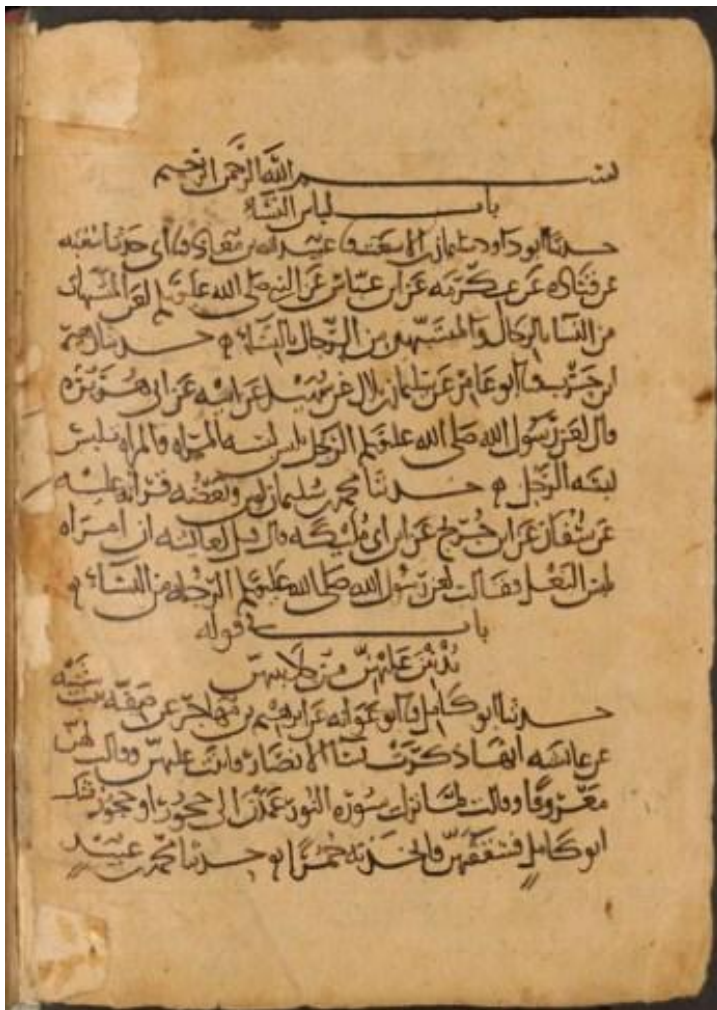
2) Abū al-Ḥusayn ‘Asākir ad-Dīn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj ibn Muslim ibn Ward ibn Kawshādh al-Qushayrī an-Naysābūrī (815–875), originally from Nishapur (located in modern-day Iran)



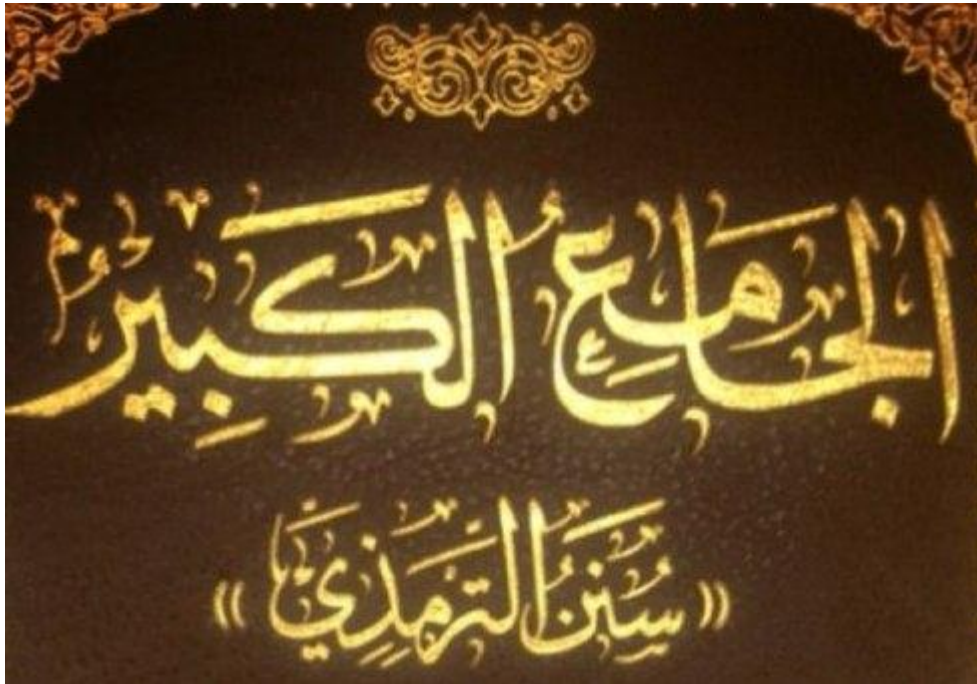
- 3) Aḥmad ibn Shu'ayb ibn Alī ibn Sīnān Abū 'Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Nasā'ī (829–915), originally from Nasā (located in modern-day Turkmenistan)



- 4) Abū Dawūd Sulaymān ibn al-Ash'ath al-Azdī al-Sijistānī (817–889), originally from Sijistan (located in modern-day Iran)



5) Abū ‘Īsa Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsa al-Sulamī al-Ḍarīr al-Būghī al-Tirmidhī (824–892), originally from Termez (located in modern-day Uzbekistan)



6) Abū ‘Abdillāh Muḥammad ibn Yazīd Ibn Mājah al-Rab‘ī al-Qazwīnī (824–889, originally from Qazvin (located in modern-day Iran)

